

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

HEBREWS 5-6

A component of all religions is the “priest.” He is the “go-between” or intermediary between God and man.

Which reminds me of a riddle: “What do you call a sleepwalking priest?” The answer: *A roam’n Catholic.*

During the pandemic there was a Catholic priest in Maryland who performed drive-thru confessionals. He had a confessional lane in his church’s parking lot. In light of social distancing guidelines *his chair was six feet from the car windows.* And people kept him busy.

Which should be no surprise, for there is a strong sense in every honest heart that we are not enough. **We need help to get to God!...** This was true of Israel of old, and to supply that help God appointed a priest.

In Chapters 5-7, the writer of Hebrews discusses the Jewish priesthood and compares it to the priesthood of Jesus. *It’s true humans need a priest, and for a time God sanctioned Israelis priests from the tribe of Levi.* But now our Savior, Jesus Christ, is a far better priest! Where the Levitical priests failed, Jesus succeeded.

The Jews trusted in a “high priest,” but to those who trust in Jesus alone, He is “**a great high priest.**”

Chapter 5, “For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins.”

Here’s the writer’s initial point, **priests for men are taken from men**. Yet this isn’t a given in all religions.

Did you know in Vietnam elephants are deemed sacred? Touch an elephant and it supposedly brings you good luck. In most pagan religions **animals** are thought to procure divine help... Some of the Jewish rabbis thought of **angels** in a similar way. Divine assistance was conveyed to men through angels.

But the writer of Hebrews insists **priests for men come from men**. Your dog fetches your slippers. Your guardian angel keeps your car from swerving into a ditch, but **neither animal or angel** helps us “*in things pertaining to God.*” Neither has any impact on our spiritual status, or can effect our relationship with God.

In verse 2 a human priest, “*can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness.*” **Priests for men come from men** because God wants priests with compassion. God cares for the ignorant, and wayward, and weak. And effective priests share His empathy.

This is why angels don’t qualify. Angels never tire, or hunger, or sleep. The angelic answer for weakness is to buck up! When angels see us cave in it baffles them.

Angels are cold-blooded do-gooders. See a puny human *give in and sin*, and an angel picks up his sword to avenge God's honor. It boggles his brain that God holds judgment at bay and shows humans mercy.

But in becoming a man, Jesus became acquainted with human weakness. He got tired, hungry, thirsty. He cried and He hurt. Jesus grew angry and discouraged.

In his 30-plus years, Jesus ran the whole gamut of human emotions - and is now able to empathize. *He's been where you're at. He understands what you need.*

Jesus supplies the peace and power we desperately seek. **This is what makes Jesus the perfect priest!**

So in regards to priests, verse 3, **“Because of this he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer sacrifices for sins.”** Once a year the Jewish High Priest offered a sacrifice to cover the nation's sins, but first he sacrificed **“for himself.”** His own sin was dealt with before he atoned for others. This safeguarded him against self-righteousness. We'll learn in Chapter 7 *the only sinless priest was our High Priest, Jesus Christ.* He was the one perfect priest between God and man.

Yet as a man even our Lord bore the shame of our sin. On the cross, our sin was thrust on Jesus' innocent shoulders. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says strikingly, **“He made Him who knew no sin, to be sin for us.”** Jesus felt the alienation from God

caused by sin. He knows sin's horrific consequences. This is why He cried, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me." As a human, Jesus understands our dilemma. Thus, He's qualified perfectly to be our priest.

Verse 4, "And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was." A priest had to be a man, *but not just any man*. He had to be a man appointed by God. And in the OT God chose priests from the tribe of Levi, and the family of Aaron.

And whenever someone lacking the proper pedigree usurped the role of priest, as did King Uzziah, God's punishment was swift and severe. Uzziah was struck with leprosy. **Priests were always God-appointed.**

As was Jesus! Even God's own Son didn't assume the role of priest. He was appointed by the Father in heaven. Verse 5 tells us, "So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He (the Father) who said to Him (the Son)" He quotes Psalm 2:7, "You are My Son, today I have begotten You."

At first the application of *this verse to this argument* seems strange. What does His birth have to do with God appointing Jesus as High Priest? But when you compare Scripture with Scripture you learn more... In Acts 13:33 Paul applies Psalm 2:7 not to Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, but to His resurrection. Jesus was "*begotten,*" or *began* a new and glorified life when

He rose from the dead, and ascended to the Father's right hand! At that point God appointed Jesus High Priest in the heavenly Temple. And today, Jesus ministers there as *God's chosen intermediary* - to intercedes for us.

Verse 6 is also helpful, "**As He also says in another place...**" And here he quotes Psalm 110:4, "**You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek...**"

Here's a crucial point, Jesus was not a **Levitical or earthly Priest**. During His earthly ministry Jesus never wore a priestly garment, or offered a Levitical sacrifice, or ministered as a priest in the Temple at Jerusalem.

Jesus was a priest, but not the OT kind - a priest after the order of Levi. *Jesus was a different type of priest entirely, of the heavenly order of Melchizedek.*

Levitical priests were **temporary and earthly**. Jesus is an **eternal and heavenly** priest. As Psalm 110 reads, "**You are a priest forever.**" Next week in Chapter 7 we'll learn about the priesthood of Melchizedek and what it teaches about Jesus' character and credentials.

But back to the humanity of a priest. He writes of Jesus, "**who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears...**" This refers to Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. In great physical agony and in deep spiritual anguish, so *that His sweat had the consistency of thick droplets of blood,*

Jesus prayed, “to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear...” Notice whatever it was Jesus prayed that night, it was heard and heeded.

We know Jesus’ heart was heavy as He entered the garden. The name “Gethsemane” means “olive press” and Jesus was under great pressure. His angst wasn’t just the next day’s cross. Imagine, the pain His disciples will cause Him. *One will betray Him. One will deny Him. All will forsake Him.* In going to the cross Jesus is being asked to die for traitors and turncoats, so-called friends, about to stab Him in the back. Often obedience requires us to put feelings aside. This is why verse 8 concludes, “though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.”

And this is what you and I are learning! *When we’re asked to love a so-called brother who does us dirty? Or forgive an enemy we thought was a friend?* Author AW Pink writes, “Our sharpest trials often come from those in whom we have instilled the most trust and to whom we have shown the greatest kindness.”

Obedience usually requires two things: some sort of struggle with our own feelings, and in the end courage.

Let me read again verse 8, “though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.” At first this sounds strange when applied to our Lord Jesus - *that God’s Son learned obedience.*

Don't misunderstand, Jesus was never disobedient. It's just that in heaven, as God's equal, He never had the opportunity to obey. You don't have to obey when you're the boss and you're always calling the shots.

But when Jesus laid aside His heavenly glory, and as a man assumed the role of servant - for the first time God's Son was called on to take orders. "*Jesus learned*" the rigors and consequences of obedience. Often times obedience involves struggle and courage.

Verse 9, "*And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.*" **Jesus learned to obey so He could be a good boss.**

This could've been the pilot episode of Undercover Boss. You've seen the TV show where the boss dresses incognito and works a grunt level job in his own company. The CEO learns what it's like to work in the trenches. Then usually he returns to the boardroom with a new appreciation and help for his workers.

This was Jesus ***our Undercover Boss***. Today, be certain when a command comes down from Jesus its not coming from some bigwig, oblivious to your situation. *Before Jesus started giving orders, He first learned how to take them.* His commands come with a purpose, and with His help they can be accomplished.

Verse 10 tells us again, Jesus has been, “called by God as High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek,” of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.” Often the problem in our churches is a *dull preacher*, or *dull sermon* - and it’s the pastors like me that bear responsibility - but at other times the problem is *dull hearing* - and that’s when it’s church members like you that are responsible... This term “*dull*” in verse 11 means “*sluggish in the ears.*” And today’s churches are full of believers with a serious hearing problem.

Some of us are selective listeners. We hear only what we want to hear, *or what applies to our spouse, or our boss, or our kids* - and never what applies to me.

A pastor was once asked if his church needed a deaf ministry. He answered, “*Yes, but we are the deaf!* The Hebrews problem wasn’t **dull teaching**, but **dull listening**. They liked to critique the preacher’s ability, when the problem was their own lack of hearing...”

The author had so many wonderful truths He hoped to share with His readers. He says in verse 11 he has much to say of the priestly ministry of Jesus. *Think of it*, Jesus is in heaven today praying for us, *how intriguing is that!* I’d love to delve into those mysteries.

But the author can’t go into it because his readers aren’t ready. Deep truths would’ve been wasted on people so hard of hearing... And it makes me wonder what insights God has

waiting for us, but He refuses to reveal them, until we hear what He's already said!

Verse 12, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God...” The “*first principles,*” or literally **the ABCs of Christianity**. These believers still hadn't learned the biblical basics.

It's foolish to teach T-ballers pick-off plays when they can't put their glove on correctly. You've got to learn the basics before you can move on to deeper stuff.

Some of the Hebrews should've been teachers by this point. Their spiritual growth and maturity had not measured up to the depth of teaching they'd received.

The writer continues to mourn the immaturity of his readers, “*and you have come to need milk and not solid food.*” Milk is for babies... people with no teeth.

It may be cute to see an infant with a bottle in its mouth, but it's absolutely disgusting to see a grown man walking around sucking on a baby bottle. And it's equally disturbing to watch a person who's been a Christian for years still struggling in the basics.

Verse 13, “*For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern*

both good and evil.” Here’s how to move out of spiritual Baby-dom - from milk to meat - it takes more than adding spiritual calories or knowledge. To build strong faith you have to exercise what you know. We grow spiritually **“by reason of use.”** Christian maturity comes by applying and using what we learn.

Several years ago I saw an NBC News article entitled, **“Big Baby Boom: Supersize Deliveries Have Doctors Worried.”** Over the last few decades there’s been a spike in the birth of big babies. A Pennsylvania woman birthed a 13 pound 12 ounce little girl. A German baby weighed in at 13.5 pounds, a whopper.

A British mom delivered *“little George,”* who weighed 15 pounds, 7 ounces. They returned his infant clothes, and brought him home in PJs meant for a 6 month old.

Today, hospitals are seeing a rash of **big babies, but so are churches!** We’ve got bloated believers with lots of fat. *They know a lot,* but they rarely apply what they know, and turn it into muscle. **Don’t be a big baby!** We all need to grow up in Christ and mature in faith.

Chapter 6, **“Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ...”** the spiritual ABCs...

“Let us go on to perfection (i.e. maturity), not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of

hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits.”

This is interesting, notice what the author lists as the basics of the faith. He sets them out in three pairs...

The first two truths teach us how to obtain and maintain a relationship with God - “repentance from dead works and of faith toward God.” From the outset of Christianity the invitation was “repent and believe.”

There’s nothing we can do to earn God’s favor. Our best efforts are “dead works” or filthy rags. We need to **believe** in what Jesus *has done* and *does now* for us. The foundation of Christianity is repent and believe.

Here’s the second pair of basics, “of the doctrine of baptisms, (and) of laying on of hands” These Christian truths concern **the work of the Holy Spirit**. Notice the writer puts it, “baptisms” plural. Realize, there are three different baptisms spoken of in the New Testament...

First, there’s our baptism into the Body of Christ (*our conversion or spiritual initiation and connection to God’s family*)... **Second**, is water baptism. This is symbolic where I identify with Jesus’ death and resurrection... And **third**, there’s Spirit baptism. This is a point-in-time filling or anointing of the Holy Spirit upon my life where I’m given power to be a witness.

Oh how I need all three baptisms... And this is where the “**laying on of hands**” by church members comes into play. In the early church physical touch was a means of spiritual conveyance. When a person was appointed to *an office*, or sent on *a mission*, or given *special authority*, or bestowed a *spiritual gift* it was conveyed or transmitted by the laying on of hands...

And when the power of God’s Spirit came upon people it too was often accompanied by physical touch. God still conveys through holy and loving hands.

Then the third pair of basic doctrines deal with the end times, “**of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.**” One day, the bodies of both the righteous and wicked will be resurrected immortal - every human being will live forever... *But then comes the judgment!* Each of us will be assigned to either heaven or hell based on how we treated God’s Son, Jesus Christ!

If you don’t have a handle on these three areas of Christianity - **relationship with God, ministry of the Holy Spirit, and final judgment** - you’ve got some catching-up to do. These are *the basics*. God has more to reveal, but first we need to grasp the foundations.

Notice again the plea in verse 1, “**Let us go on...**” We need to “**go on**” in faith. Faith is not a one-time proposition, **we**

continue in faith. And the writer is concerned about those who are **stuck** or **stunted**...

He issues a warning, verse 4, “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.” The point is **don’t fall away.** Continue in faith. But in making this point other questions get raised...

First, is it possible for a true Christian to fall away from the faith and forfeit or lose their salvation?

Some folks say “no.” They skirt around verses 4-5 by suggesting the descriptions don’t apply to legitimate Christian conversion. “O, when it says they were *partakers of the Holy Spirit, they just flirted with Him, but never married... Or “tasted the heavenly gift” that means they held it in their mouth, but didn’t swallow.*”

Sounds like President Clinton when he confessed he smoked marijuana, “**but didn’t inhale.**” His words defied commonsense. The point of smoking is to inhale.

Commentator, Warren Wiersbe, was a staunch, once-saved-always-saved advocate, yet even he conceded, “To suggest the phrase, *“partakers of the Holy Spirit,”* means they

only went along with the Spirit to an extent is to ignore the meaning of the verb. It means “*to become sharers.*” I’ve concluded the people addressed were true believers, not mere professors.”

It’s also interesting that in other passages these same terms are clearly used of bonafide believers. In Hebrews 3:1 and 3:14 - the “*partakers*” there are obviously Christians. This whole letter was written to true believers... There’s no doubt in my mind, Chapter 6 is a warning to Christians that if they fall away, and stop trusting in Jesus, and turn their back on His provision for their salvation, they’ll no longer be saved.

Don’t misunderstand, I’m not saying a believer can lose their salvation by anything they do or don’t do. Good works don’t earn salvation; and misdeeds don’t lose salvation. Remember the basics, a relationship with God is based on faith, not works. **But** if you don’t nurture your faith, the faith you once had can atrophy and die. Faith is not a sign on the bottomline, contractual kind of proposition, it’s more like a seed. It’s a plant that has to be watered and nurtured or it can die. And “*Without faith it is impossible to please God.*”

And, this raises a **second** question from this text, “*If Hebrews 6 teaches a person can disavow their faith, and lose their salvation; then doesn’t it also teach that once it’s lost it can never be retrieved?*” For when you read the passage straight through it says, “*For it is impossible ... if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify*

again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.”

First, remember there's a host of Bible passages that teach as long as a wayward soul has breath, there's hope. The Prodigal Son was part of the family **before** he fell away, yet the Father warmly welcomed him back when he came home with a repentant heart.

Also Romans 11:23 says of the Jews who were cut off from the vine, “They also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.” Note, “*for God is able to graft them in again.*” They had it, lost it, then get it back again. *It's possible!*

I believe the writer here is saying that if a person falls away from faith in Jesus, and denies the Lord's ability to secure their salvation, they're personally rejecting or crucifying Jesus all over again. They bring shame to His name. And as long as they maintain that stance of unbelief; it's impossible to renew them to repentance.

But the passage doesn't say what happens if they do return! The rest of Scripture attests that if they do, God will graciously renew them to repentance and once again they'll become a recipient of God's mercies.

Recall these Hebrew believers were being tempted to return to the religion of Judaism. And here they're being warned, if they renew their faith in Levitical priests, and animal sacrifices, and Temple ritual - they are renouncing Jesus as

God's sole provision for their sin. And you can't have it both ways. **It's either / or...**

You can't trust in the blood of animals as payment for your sin, and in the blood of Christ at the same time.

Think of it this way. Say some kind, loving, wonderful person in our church gives me tickets to the Braves game - *it's been a while, but let's just say!* Yet my kids are in town so I give them away. Now **I can't go to the game.** As long as I don't have a ticket I've got no hope of getting into the game. *You've got to have a ticket!*

But that doesn't mean I can't go to the box office and purchase a new ticket. I can, as long as tickets are still available... ***and breathe easy, heaven's not yet full!***

Verse 7 tells us, **“For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; but if it bears thorns and briars, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned.”**

Like the rain, God's grace falls upon all men. But it's what we do with the rain that matters. If we bear fruit we'll be blessed. If we sprout thorns we'll be cursed. **Our destiny is shaped by our response to God's grace.**

“But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we speak

in this manner.” He’s warning the Hebrews, but He has high hopes they’ll take heed.

And if they persevere in their faith they’ll receive a reward. **“For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister.”** Those who fall away from their faith never receive the reward they could’ve if they’d persevered.

Verse 11, **“And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”** I love this verse. *Here’s how you hold on!...*

Realize there’s always a lapse of time between the giving of a promise, and the fulfillment of that promise. Thus, **it takes faith and patience to inherit a promise.**

Some folks start out with faith, but they lack patience. As a result their faith flames out and dies.

Whereas other folks wait on God, but they never trust Him and take steps of faith. They get spiritually sluggish and lose momentum. *They’re in a perpetual holding pattern.* If they’re going to land the promise they need to exercise their faith... It’s the combination of both **faith and patience** that inherits God’s promises.

And he points to Abraham as an example. Verse 13, “For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, “Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you. And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute.”

God’s promise to Abraham was the seed from which all salvation flowers. Jesus descended from Abraham, thus everyone saved by Jesus is blessed through the promises made to Abram. And God was serious about His promise, so much so He confirmed it with an oath.

In antiquity taking an oath was as signing a contract. The other party might not trust you, so you’d swear by someone greater than yourself - *the priest or king*. And in doing so you were calling on that person to make certain you held up your end of the deal. *If I swear by the king; then count on the king to enforce my oath!*

So when God promised to bless Abraham, He took an oath to give Abraham *and us* the utmost confidence. *But who does God swear by?* No one is greater than God, so He swore by Himself. Verse 17, “Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability (or unchangeableness) of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things (i.e. *His original promise and then His oath*), in which it is impossible for God to lie, we

might have strong consolation...” No one in history has made a promise more secure than the promise of our salvation.

God’s willingness to bless Abraham, and in doing so save us, is sealed by two immutable or unalterable entities - **God’s word and God’s oath!** He cannot lie, thus His word should be enough to assure us, but God puts *guarantee on top of guarantee*, He adds His oath.

Abraham had a long wait for the fulfillment of the promise God made to him. His son, Isaac, was born twenty-five years after the promise was given. But Abraham’s wait was nothing compared to the recipients of God’s salvation. The OT Jews, and the Gentiles who would believe, waited 2000 years from God’s promise to Abraham until the birth of Messiah.

God knew there’d be a long wait - that’s why He bolstered the faith of His people by sealing His immutable promise with an oath. He swore by Himself!

Like playing cards, and trumping the trick your partner just won. We say, **“I double won it.”** That’s what God did with our salvation, *it’s been double won*. Faith is only as good as its object... and thus God gives us double-assurance - **His promise and His oath.** You and I have no excuse to ever, ever, ever fall away!

For verse 18 identifies us as, **“We who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.”** Here he refers to Numbers 35 and **the cities of refuge.** Unlike today, in OT

times revenge was **a right**. If you took the life of my family member, even by accident - it was my right, if not my duty, to take your life. An **eye for an eye**.

Yet God defended the innocent. If the cause of death was accidental, the person at who's hands the death occurred could flee to a **"city of refuge"** for protection.

And as long as he stayed put within the walls of that city he was safe. If he left the city, he was on his own.

And this was figurative of our hope in Christ. Jesus is our **city of refuge!** Continue in Him and He protects us from the penalties of sin. But fall away from your faith. *Leave town, so to speak* - and you're on your own. This is why the writer exhorts us to continue in Christ!

Verse 19, **"This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever..."** One of the earliest Christian symbols was that of a boat anchor. Archeologists have found over 60 anchors carved in the walls of the catacombs in Rome.

If your faith is in Christ, then He is your anchor. And an anchor is the object beyond the surface. It can't be seen, yet it holds what's on top of the water, what's visible, so it doesn't drift... A ship's anchor is *below the water*, but our anchor, Jesus, is *above the heavens*.

A ship's anchor grabs onto the ocean floor. Whereas, the risen Christ soared into heaven, and has hooked Himself to God's throne. He's now holding tight and He anchors anyone on the surface who connects to Him. This means, **you have a friend in high places!**

Here on life's surface, violent storms arise: *viruses, cancers, financial uncertainties, unfair persecution*. Yet when these storms blow it's comforting to know that **we're anchored**. We're tied off to something greater than ourselves. Jesus has us anchored to God.

That's why we need to continue on with Jesus. No drawing back! Cut the tie-line of faith and you'll drift.

I love how the poet puts it, "I can feel the anchor fast as I meet each sudden blast, and the cable, though unseen, bears the heavenly strain between; through the storm I safely ride, till the turning of the tide. And it holds, my anchor holds... Blow your wildest, then, O gale, on my bow so small and frail; by His grace I shall not fail, for my anchor holds, my anchor holds."

No matter what you've been called on to endure you'll hold fast if you're anchored to Jesus. *Don't let go.*

The chapter closes, Jesus is our "High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." We have an anchor in heaven - a priest named Jesus - but not just any priest, one

after *“the order of Melchizedek.”* And this is such a big deal!
We’ll learn why next week...